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THE EXPANDING CHURCH¹

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The first Christian community became the expanding church by what seemed at the time a catastrophe, namely, through the drastic persecution that first found violent expression in the death of that vigorous propagandist, Stephen. Stephen himself had come into official prominence because "the number of the disciples was multiplying,"² and therefore problems of administration were becoming more complex in the early Christian community. From the first that community had been expanding daily, so that "the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly."³ Its growth did not come exclusively from the common people, for "a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." But a new era began when persecution so scattered the Christian community that its members were to be found "throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria."⁴

Roughly speaking, the period of the early community may be regarded as that of the Twelve; the expanding church seems to be the work of the evangelists; their work comes into collision with Saul,⁵ and he initiates a new era in the history of the faith. We are concerned for the present with the work of the evangelists, Stephen and Philip, Acts, chaps. 6-8. Stephen precipitated a crisis and Philip utilized its outcome to the advantage of the faith. In the meantime, the Twelve recede into the background; despite the persecution of the community they remain in Jerusalem while the faith spreads. All are scattered "except the apostles."⁶ Not till after success has been attained in Samaria do these supposed leaders have a place in the work there.⁷ Incidentally, on the way home, they "preached the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans."⁸ It is the evangelists apparently who awaken the circle of the Twelve to a sense of the

¹ This study covers the period included in the International Sunday School Lessons for February 21, 28, and March 7.

² Acts 6:1.

⁴ Acts 8:1.

⁶ Acts 8:1.

⁸ Acts 8:25.

³ Acts 6:7.

⁵ Acts 7:58; 8:13.

⁷ Acts 8:14.

Palestinian world outside Jerusalem. Before long Paul will shock them into an imperial vision.

At the present time our attention may be directed to the new blood represented in Stephen and Philip. These men are two of seven who had recently come into power in the early Christian community. Their office as defined by the Twelve is narrow; they are to "serve tables."⁹ Chosen by the whole society on the basis of proved character, administrative grasp, and religious fervor, they no sooner have their hands upon the affairs of the community than they demonstrate their capacity for aggressive and initiatory work of the highest order. Presently they are outdoing those whose time was so precious that they could not "forsake the word of God."¹⁰ Thus it came about that what seemed like unworthy bickering and disaffection over secondary matters¹¹ worked out for the bringing into splendid leadership of potential material in the community that otherwise might diffidently have refrained from vigorous self-expression. Around the Twelve there was built up through this incident a secondary circle that speedily became primary, so far as initiative work determines rank.

Both Stephen and Philip gained their hearing, in the first instance, through their ability to do before the multitudes things that were regarded as marvelous and as indicative of league with God himself: "Stephen, full of grace and power, wrought great wonders and signs among the people;"¹² "and the multitudes gave heed with one accord unto the things that were spoken by Philip, when they heard, and saw the signs which he did. For *from* many of those which had unclean spirits, they came out, crying with a loud voice: and many that were palsied, and that were lame, were healed. And there was much joy in that city."¹³ Certainly there should have been joy; and why not as certainly a careful hearing and a ready heeding to the message of one so endowed? There is no reason to doubt that Stephen and Philip were able to do the things here credited to them. Their effects were wrought apparently in cases of functional derangement, not structural; we are learning not to set limits to the power of faith, notably religious faith, in the correction of disorders that fundamentally are neurotic.

⁹ Acts 6:2.

¹¹ Acts 6:1.

¹³ Acts 8:6-8.

¹⁰ Acts 6:2.

¹² Acts 6:8.

And religious faith never is so seemingly limitless in its achievements as when a community first is swayed by the impulses that are generated through a fresh sense of the reality and nearness of God, a sense begotten by that intimacy of contact with the divine which comes through a discovery or rediscovery of the easy accessibility of God. And it was as a discoverer and clear annunciator of the mode of access to God that Jesus was becoming, under the hands of these men, the founder of a new religious society.

But that same fresh, vivid sense of the reality and nearness of God, which accounts for the ability of Stephen and Philip to work marvels for the physical side of their hearers, is the genesis of those points of religious view which brought them into clash with the sophisticated religion of the day. Obviously such directness of fellowship with God and sense of the influence of His Spirit as these men gave evidence of enjoying bear implications that make for the undoing of the more formal and external aspects of religion. And it is apparently to these implications, unexpressed or expressed, that their opposers make objection in the terms of their charge: "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and *against* God. . . . This man ceaseth not to speak words against this holy place, and the law: for we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered unto us."¹⁴

It is true that the narrative of Acts states that these charges were framed by "suborned men" and "false witnesses;" but it is also obvious from the address of Stephen in reply to these charges that his words were open to this construction. Apparently the center of the objection to Stephen's position is that it implies a great lessening of the value given to the Temple as the abode of Jehovah. With the loss of the dominance of the Temple there would go inevitably much of "the law" and many of "the customs which Moses delivered." Now it is very clear from the attitude of Stephen in Acts 7:44-50 that his convictions about God's nearness and accessibility had shaken him loose from the traditional conception about the Temple and its worth as the abode of the Most High. Such an exposition as this, doubtless not now expressed by him for the first

¹⁴ Acts 6:11-14.

time, would form a justifiable basis for the charges preferred against him. So that both the wonders worked by the evangelists, with the consequent favorable attitude of the multitudes, and the fundamental religious positions taken, with the consequent disfavor from the religious leaders, had their genesis in those increments of personal power begotten by that directness of approach and ease of access to God, the sense of which had been generated by Jesus through both life and words.

The purpose of the lengthy historical review made by Stephen in his defense seems to be threefold: (1) to establish that Moses had promised a prophet like himself, for whom therefore the nation ought to be in expectancy; (2) to convince them that Moses on whom they now prided themselves had great difficulty in gaining a hearing and a following from their fathers, hence presumably the same was to be expected for the promised prophet; (3) to prove that on the basis of their own scriptures it was right to assert that "the Most High dwelleth not in *houses* made with hands." With the establishment of the last point Stephen turns suddenly, almost savagely, to the application of the whole matter to his hearers: "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye." *They* spurned the delivering purposes of Moses; *ye* have now become betrayers and murderers of the successor promised by Moses. The effort had been to bring a person and a history they revered into the service of a person they were despising, and to the stemming of certain phases of that history which they were duplicating. The effort failed. History had already repeated itself, and was beyond recall. He who was bold enough to recount it fell for his temerity.

Thus appeased, religious bigotry took on new energy and determination. Protest, hitherto smothered, became open and more violent and extensive in expression. The new religious society was hounded and persecuted until scattered abroad through the provinces. But the aims of the persecutors were defeated. They had simply sent off into every corner of the country the fire they had endeavored to extinguish. What they thought would mean the death of the Christian community became to it the revelation of the undying vitality of its life: "They therefore that were scattered abroad went about preaching the word."¹⁵

¹⁵ Acts 8:4.

The city of Samaria received its quota of the refugees, among them one of the Seven, Philip. He seems to have begun promptly to proclaim "unto them the Christ,"¹⁶ to preach "good tidings concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ."¹⁷ Because of the mighty works accompanying his exposition of his ideas he had a favorable hearing, initial to a hearty response. One could wish that there had been preserved for us some adequate report of the content of the addresses by which these early propagandists wrought so effectively. Though we have several long speeches reported in Acts, these are for the most part defenses or apologies for positions already taken, not the first efforts to introduce their ideas to a new audience. Yet we are able, perhaps correctly, to infer that the burden of their effort was to prove that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was in truth the expected Messiah, and worthy, therefore, of treatment as such, by allegiance and worship.

Apparently many of the forms of marvel wrought by the early Christian propagandists had to do with human needs which were already being met with greater or less success by practitioners of various classes. We know that the casting-out of demons, or exorcism, was commonly practiced by the sons of those who accused Jesus of being in league with Beelzebub. And sorcerers of rare skill were able greatly to extend the range of their effective handling of nervous disorders, especially in communities where they were able once to gain the confidence of the populace. Such a one was flourishing in Samaria at the time of the visit of Philip.¹⁸ But he was greatly outdone by the power manifested through Philip. Undoubtedly the source of this power proved a serious puzzle to Simon, the master sorcerer. So long as the facts were before him without any reputed explanation, he seems to have been deeply impressed. But the coming of the apostles from Jerusalem, with the open talk about the Holy Spirit as the dynamic force of the movement, and the seemingly obvious and mechanical mode for the transference of this secret and effective power from man to man gave a new cast for the whole matter to Simon. It took on the aspect of something open to easy commerce, and hence to be had for the purchasing. It looked like a higher form of his own art of sorcery, and he was eager for initiation into the

¹⁶ Acts 8:5.

¹⁷ Acts 8:12.

¹⁸ Acts 8:9-13.

mystery of its methods. It is not made evident, indeed, in the narrative that the outcomes of the new gift were other than what seemed to be a higher sorcery.¹⁹ Certainly such effects as were fundamentally personal and moral would not be obvious to the scrutiny of one whose interests were primarily thaumaturgic.

Undoubtedly the most serious problem that faced the earliest propagators of the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ lay in the fact that his whole career, and most notably its climax, gave denial to the validity of the conviction when judged by the standards of messianic activity prevalent in that time. A crucified Christ was a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. That the Christ should have suffered was an intolerable offense to the contemporary sense of what was appropriate for the messianic career. From those whom Jesus had so impressed that they could give him no less than messianic worth there was demanded, therefore, if they would make their estimate prevail with others, the proof that despite his form of reception by his people and his death he was nevertheless truly the Christ. And no proof could be made convincing that was not grounded in the sacred writings. Therefore the early Christians diligently searched the Scriptures for those passages which would lend themselves to an application to the career of Jesus as actually lived. Wherever suffering was portrayed, there prophetic forecast of the career of the Christ was assumed, and the passage was made to do service as an apologetic for the interpretation of Jesus as the Christ.

We observe this process under way in the recorded relations of Philip to the Ethiopian treasurer.²⁰ That the Isaianic paragraph was not generally regarded in Jesus' time as messianic seems clear from the question, "I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other?" It is one of those prophetic passages the application of which was not and is not so obvious as is generally the case where prophetic meaning is being considered. This ambiguity and uncertainty of reference made it easily possible for the early propagandists to employ effectively a sketch that seemed so accurately to portray those features of the career of Jesus that were most puzzling and objectionable to those who would regard him as the Christ. It is

¹⁹ Acts 8:14-24.

²⁰ Acts 8:26-40.

not easy to overestimate the quickness and certainty of conviction that could be wrought by the skilful employment, upon minds susceptible to the scriptural appeal, of such passages as this Isaianic description, when accepted and explicated as a forecast of the messianic career as assumedly wrought out by Jesus. It is to be believed that, even among the influential and learned, results would often come with the speed and apparent ease seen in the case of the Ethiopian treasurer. And subsequently he could himself establish his recently formed conviction by a searching of the Scriptures for the portrayal of suffering and rejection which were frequently the lot of the servant of Jehovah.

Evidently the work of the evangelists was not confined to those incidents alone that have become part of our record of the apostolic age, for we are told that Philip "preached the gospel to all the cities till he came to Caesarea."²¹ Their work constituted what may perhaps rightly be regarded as the epoch of transition from the narrower activity of the Twelve to the broadly conceived activity of Paul. It is their work that calls out the fiercest antagonism of Saul; the impact of it upon Saul is the agency for the making of Paul.

²¹ Acts 8:40.